

# The United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) in Sabah, East Malaysia: An Overview 1990-1994

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## **Abstract**

This paper used historical approach to describe the development of the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) with a descriptive method, especially for the early stage in Sabah. UMNO was established in Mei 1946 as a coalition of 41 units of the Malays organisations to oppose Malayan Union policy in Malaya. Meanwhile, UMNO in Sabah was only officially established on February 21, 1991, following the dissolution of the United Sabah National Organisation (USNO) party. The application to establish UMNO in Sabah was made after Joseph Pairin Kitingan, President of Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) decided to withdraw his party from the Barisan Nasional (BN)/National Front coalition to join the Gagasan Rakyat (opposition party) just a few days before the 1990 General Election. Issues such as emotional factors, racism and parochialism had caused organizations such as the Malays Peninsula Scholars Congress and the Association of Teachers of Peninsular Sabah and the Federal Territory (PGSSWP) (Kongres Cendekiawan Melayu Semenanjung dan Persatuan Guru-Guru Semenanjung dan Wilayah Persekutuan) to urge the UMNO leaders to come to Sabah. On October 17, 1990, Ghaffar Baba announced that UMNO would immediately be expanded to Sabah. Consequently, February 21, 1991, the USNO President announced in final assembly that the USNO party should be dissolved and all those members should join UMNO. On April 12, 1991, Harris Salleh and the Secretary-General of BERJAYA party, Ibrahim Kalali also joined UMNO. In Sabah State Elections in February 1994, UMNO (BN) won 23 out of 48 seats. However, the tide turned when some MPs in PBS joined UMNO or the BN parties. Consequently, Pairin was forced to relinquish the Chief Minister post on March 13, 1994.

**Keywords:** *UMNO, USNO, BN, PBS, Sabah and elections.*

## **Introduction**

UMNO was established by 41 organisations in Sultan Sulaiman Club, Selangor. This organization was officially began on May 11, 1946, according the implementation of Malayan Union policy (PSMBP, 2006: 1).

Since its inception until 1988, UMNO has been in harmony situation. Suddenly on February 12, 1988 (42 years 7 months) the Malaysian Registrar of Societies (ROS) refused to register the party and it was banned. The ban arose from a case brought by 'Group 11' regarding the

participation in party election. One issue was the clash between most of powerful leaders in Malaysia namely Mahathir Mohammad (Malaysia Prime Minister) and the Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah (Malaysia Cabinet Minister). On February 8, 1988, Sanusi Junid sent a letter to the office of ROS regarding the result of the party election. On February 12, 1988 (Ref. PPM.457/49 Vol. 5-115) ROS made a clear determination to dissolve UMNO effective immediately. This revocation was gazetted on February 15, 1988 (Hussain, 1997: 136).

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah who lost in the party election endeavored to extend his influence through the general election. Thus, he collaborated with a number of political parties who had relationships with the UMNO (BN) such as Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah (APU) in Islamic-Malay dominant and Gagasan Rakyat for non-Malay dominant area.

In Sabah, Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) was the dominant party and controlled the state during from 1985 to 1994. Most of PBS supporters are consists of non-Muslim indigenous such as Kadazandusun and also Chinese communities. Meanwhile, a majority of Muslim voted for USNO (United Sabah National Organization) and BERJAYA (Bersatu Rakyat Jelata Sabah) (Salleh, 2004).

### **Early Stage of Sabah UMNO**

The relationship between indigenous Muslim Sabahan political leaders with UMNO was indeed familiar. This relationships between Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Mustapha especially in early stage of Malaysia formation was evident. Under Tunku's tenure as Prime Minister (1957-1969), there were no issues on either side. On the days of USNO establishment in Kudat (December 1961), Tunku congratulated USNO leaders via telegram for establishing a political organization among the indigenous (particularly Muslim) people in Sabah. Tunku did not attend the ceremony but sent a few representatives from Federation of Malaya (PTM) as observers. Ismail Yusuf was one of the representatives of Malaya who made a clear statement that the establishment of USNO would facilitate the formation of Malaysia" (Aziz, 2005: 66).

In the 1960s, Tun Mustapha made an attempt to establish UMNO in Sabah. Through the book of anniversary of 10 Years of USNO celebration, Tunku Abdul Rahman revealed that Tun Mustapha proposed to Tunku about the establishment of UMNO in Sabah. Tunku however explained that requirement was in conflicts with the UMNO constitution (ANS/ AGP/USNO-5: 15).

Two points prompted UMNO to be brought into Sabah. Firstly the death of Tun Razak in January, 1976 and secondly, USNO lost to BERJAYA in Sabah State Legislative Assembly Election, April 1976. A USNO youth leader, Dzulkiflee Abdul Hamid strongly supported the proposal for UMNO to penetrate Sabah's politics. He was convinced that an UMNO presence in Sabah would secure the indigenous Muslim position in politics. Dzulkiflee also suggested that the word "Native" should replace "National" so that UMNO's new name would be United Malays "Native" Organization (Hamid, June 30, 2004: Daily Express, June 28, 1976: 2).

The request to expand UMNO into Sabah is highly recommended after BERJAYA's lost to PBS (Parti Bersatu Sabah) in the 1985 Sabah State Election. In the meantime, USNO & BERJAYA returned to coalesce when facing the challenges of PBS. Both parties hoped that the presence of UMNO would reduce the dominance of PBS in Sabah. However this proposal was stalled when top UMNO leaders experienced overwhelming problems especially from Team A (Mahathir) and Team B (Tengku Razaliegh) (Baba, 1991: 5).

The clash of top leaders in Kuala Lumpur provided an opportunity for opposition parties such as DAP (Democratic Action Party) and PAS (Parti Islam se-Malaysia) to penetrate Sabah. DAP was the first political organization from the peninsula which won a seat in Sabah when their candidate, Fung Ket Wing (DAP) beat Chin Hon Chong (BERJAYA/BN), in the 1978 Sandakan parliamentary Election, with the largest majority (3,416 votes). BN lost to opposition in this seat with the overwhelming number of Chinese voters dissatisfied under the role of BERJAYA government (Aziz, 2015: 98).

Meanwhile PAS firstly based in Sabah on July 11, 1986. PAS contested in the Sabah parliamentary election in 1986, in three seats of Kota Belud, Kimanis and Libaran. A favorable vote was obtained with of 3,629 votes in Kota Belud for the first attempt in Sabah (Aziz, 2015: 100).

In 1990 General Election, Mahathir experienced tremendous pressure from Tengku Razaliegh Hamzah. Mahathir led the BN while Tengku Razaliegh led the Angkatan Perpaduan Ummah and Gagasan Rakyat. Joseph Pairin Kitingan (PBS) was compelled by Tengku Razaliegh to support opposition, resulting PBS leaving BN to join the Gagasan Rakyat. This scenario occurred a few days before polling.

The switch placed BN under pressure because the party needed a strong support to face opposition challenges. BN chairman, Mahathir described Pairin's action as a back stabbing when he left BN to join the opposition. BERJAYA later acted to dissolve their party and supported BN in the election (Daily Express, October 22, 1990:1).

Pairin led the parochial party dissatisfaction with the federal government regarding the policy of government in the state and religion aspects. (Maleh, 2004; Salleh, 2004).

Before election, the USNO Assemblymen numbers were 12, while BERJAYA was only one through Mohd Noor Mansor representing the constituency of Buang Sayang, Papar. Meanwhile, in the 1990 General Election, PBS contested 14 parliamentary seats, six to USNO and one to UMNO in Labuan. DAP also contested at nine seats, AKAR (4), PAS (1) and Independents (24 seats) (Daily Express, October 16, 1990: 18).

After the results the 1990 General Election was announced, PBS won in all constituencies which they contested and increased parliamentary seats from 11 to 14, meanwhile USNO had won six.

UMNO won in Labuan with their candidate, Abdul Mulok Awang Damit had won with the largest majority of 3,562 votes defeating Independent candidate supported by PBS in Labuan (Daily Express, October 22, 1990: 10).

BERJAYA were defeated in all constituencies that the party contested. Harris himself only managed to get 969 votes against his opponent. Meanwhile for USNO, the party still maintain 12 state seats and six parliamentary seats. Meanwhile, support for the PBS remained intact as it won 35 seats. Hence Sabah was ruled by PBS (Daily Express, July 18, 1990: 18).

According the state of Sabah who was ruled by PBS, several organisations recommended that UMNO to be established in Sabah as soon as possible to face PBS with characterizations such as racial and religious sentiments. Among the organisations suggested that UMNO must be expanded to Sabah were Malay Peninsula Scholars Congress and the Association of Teachers of Peninsular Federal Territory in Sabah (PGSSWP). Congress approved in meeting and took a 20-point resolution urging the federal government to set up UMNO in Sabah. Congress also has been supported by several Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) such as the Muslim Youth Movement of Malaysia (ABIM), the Federation of National Writers (GAPENA), Teachers' Union of Malaysia Berhad (KGGMB) and several other organisations (Musli Oli, 1999). The uncertainty of Sabah's politics in the 1990 General Election gave a bad impression of the state, affecting its economic development and unity among the people (Daily Express, October 19, 1990: 18).

During General Election campaign on 17th October, 1990, Tun Ghaffar Baba has announced that UMNO would be expanded to Sabah immediately. This announcement was closely related to the action of Pairin's decision to bring PBS out from BN coalition a few days before elections. Ghaffar's speech was delivered in the opening USNO General Meeting Closure which was held on February 21, 1991 at Wisma Sabah Islamic Religious Council (MUIS), Kota Kinabalu. It was revealed that UMNO always had the intention to penetrate Sabah since 1986, but the existence of an internal party rift caused that ambition to be postponed (Buku Atur Cara Sempena Pecah Tanah Bangunan UMNO Sabah, 16 Mei, 2003: 14).

Sabah UMNO received a full cooperation from the USNO Supreme Council (MT) to set up Sabah Sabah UMNO Liaison Committee consisting of 14 representatives, eight of whom were of the USNO group and six of whom were from non-USNO group. The meeting also decided that the members of USNO would automatically join UMNO, thus accepting the appointment of Aminah Embrose as a Sabah Wanita UMNO Liaison Committee (Wariya, 1992: 129).

The assembly of Youth and Women on February 21, 1991, at Wisma MUIS Council was the last moment in of existence for the USNO in the Malaysian politics. Nearly 3,000 people attended the ceremony as representatives and observers. Representative made a resolution that its party (USNO) would dissolve of thus providing a path for UMNO to establish itself in Sabah. Tun Mustapha as former President, had joined UMNO with the registration membership number, 00007007 (Daily Express, February 21, 1991: 16).

On February 21, 1991, Mahathir was invited to officiate of the USNO General Assembly at Wisma MUIS, Kota Kinabalu. In his speech, Mahathir stressed about the political unification of the peninsula and Sabah. Consolidation of the people is a key factor for UMNO to come to Sabah.

At the initial stage, Mahathir suggested the USNO should not be dissolved even with the advent of UMNO. Mahathir's proposal has its own political reasons, because the Constitution of the State Assembly required a revoked status, if a State Assemblyman left the party that he won. To avoid this scenario from happening to USNO Assemblymen, Mahathir advised USNO representatives to remain in the party. Secondly, Mahathir was worried that if USNO was dissolved, there were those who would attempt to revive USNO and use the name of the party to contest in election. This would affect the chances of UMNO (BN) to win in General Election 1994 (Mahathir Mohammad, speech, 1991: 29-30).

Consequently Mustapha during delivering a speech in the UMNO General Assembly, formulated five resolutions as follows (The Constitution of the State of Sabah, 1989; Speech of Tun Mustapha Datu Harun in USNO General Assembly, 1991).

- i. Full support for UMNO to establish branches, divisions without dissolving the party.
- ii. USNO administrative affairs are handled by the Executive Council (EC) consisting of all the USNO Assemblymen.
- iii. Abolish all USNO divisions and branches including Youth and Women's Movement at all levels from February 25, 1991. This was both the USNO leaders hold positions in UMNO existed by UMNO.
- iv. Donate all USNO properties to USIA (United Sabah Islamic Association).
- v. Submit to the BN supreme council to decide on the formation of a coalition government in the state.

Ghaffar Baba was appointed the Chief Liaison of Sabah UMNO and Tun Mustapha as the deputy. Mustapha initially did not agree with Ghaffar's appointment because he stressed that the post should be held by somebody from Sabah. Due to the temporary appointment, he accepted the arrangement and hoped that the position would be changed later (Daily Express, February 10, 1991: 20).

Mohd Dun Banir, a former USNO and BERJAYA leader, disagreed with the appointment of Mustapha and feared Sabah UMNO stunted growth and unobstructed on the actions of some individuals who were interested. Mohd Dun's view was due to the fact that the group who brought UMNO into Sabah in the early stages was not composed of USNO leaders, but rather six individuals outside from USNO led by Mohd Dun itself (Daily Express, February 28, 1991:13).

Sabah UMNO's was strengthened when almost all Muslim-indigenous leaders of Sabah joined the party. On April 12, 1991, Harris with the Secretary-General, Ibrahim Kalali joined UMNO in

Labuan (Daily Express, 13 April 1991). O.T. Alip Haji Bakar, the head village of Kg. Darau, Menggatal supported all efforts by Mustapha to expand UMNO even though he was a USNO member (Aziz, 2005: 245). Ismail Shuaib, a member of the BERJAYA in Kinabatangan, also agreed with the arrival of the UMNO (Shuib, 2004).

As a solution, on March 9, 1991, the Committee announced that the establishment of UMNO Liaison. 20 were selected to lead the party, with 14 leaders and 6 more from outside the UMNO. In 1991, Sabah UMNO Committee Members, were Datu Mustapha Datu Harun (Kota Belud), Datu Abdul Salam Datu Harun (Kota Marudu), Saidi Suari (Bandau), Juslie Ajirul (Jambangan), Ampon Puyon (Sandakan), Juhar Mahiruddin (Kinabatangan), Osu Sukam (Papar), John Ghani (Kimanis), Onn Arifin (Limbawang), Yusuf Yaakob (Padas), Kassim Kamidin (Tawau), Railey Jeffrey (Silam), Sakaran Dandai (Semporna), Yahya Hussein (Tanjung Aru), Kasitah Gaddam (Kinabalu), James Ghani (Penampang), Mohd Dun Banir (Keningau), Dzulkiflee Abdul Hamid (Gaya), Karim Ghani (Pensiangan) and Abdul Rahim Ismail (Tuaran) (Daily Express, March 10, 1991: 1).

The first challenge faced by USNO assemblymen who joined UMNO was being forced to vacate their seats if they opted out from the party. The State Constitution through Phase 18, Article 2 (d) provided that;

"...an assemblyman automatically will lose the seat if he was no longer a member of the party on which ticket he won the seat ..." (Constitution of the State of Sabah: 1989: 26).

Mustapha was the first USNO assemblyman who announced joining UMNO. Accordingly, after Mustapha's action, the State Assembly Secretary, Francis Yap announced that Usukan seats were vacant. Mustapha however expressed a different interpretation of the vacancy order (Yusoff, 2000: 531).

Mustapha explained he was merely of UMNO member and never left USNO which was not prohibited in the USNO constitution. Article 4 (3) of the UMNO Constitution also describes being an affiliated member of the political party and accept the conditions set up by the party Supreme Council (UMNO Constitution, 1993).

Accordingly the Usukan seat was declared vacant, so Election Commission (EC) has decided to hold a by-election for the seat represented by Mustapha. The nomination process was set on April 30 while the polling day on May 11, 1991. Tun Mustapha contested on UMNO ticket and was challenged by Jap Omar (PBS), a former Kota Belud District Officer. After the election result was announced, Mustapha still maintained his position with 2,492 votes. His was the first victory for an UMNO Sabah seat in the Legislative Assembly (Borneo Mail, 30 April 1991: 2; Daily Express, May 12, 1991: 14).

The success of Tun Mustapha was closely related to his personality. After the victory in Usukan, UMNO has become more confident to gain a foothold in the state. In early February 1991,

Sabah UMNO distributed membership form to almost 500,000 members of the public. On March 10, 1991 a total of 50,000 form were successful returned (Daily Express, February 1, 1991: 16; March 11, 1991: 13).

One of the factors why UMNO received overwhelming response from a majority of Sabahan was that the party's constitution does not restrict any individual to join the party (UMNO Constitution, 1993).

On November 8, 1991, for the first time Sabah UMNO attended the General Assembly in Kuala Lumpur as representatives and observers. On March 1, 1992, a total of 20 divisions in Sabah held their first meeting. Sabah UMNO first convention was held at Wisma MUIS, Kota Kinabalu on October 25, 1992. The ceremony was officiated by Ghaffar Baba. At that time, Sabah UMNO had 246,000 members and the largest concentration of membership in the state (Buku Upacara Pecah Tanah Bangunan UMNO Sabah, 2003).

In February 1991, the Kota Kinabalu High Court announced Phase 18, Article 2 (d), in the State Constitution that restricting assemblyman crossovers had been revoked (The Straits Times, September 23, 1992: 15). Since Phase 18 was repealed by a court, 11 Assemblyman from USNO joined UMNO immediately.

On September 1993, party decided that Sakaran Dandai should take over Ghaffar Baba position while John Ghani was appointed as Deputy. The appointment strongly worried Mustapha, who intended to become the Chairman of UMNO State Liaison. At 12.00 pm, January 20, 1994, Mustapha made an unexpected press conference announcement that he would leave UMNO and resigned as Minister of Sabah Affairs. PBS Secretary-General, Raden Maleh stressed that Mustapha had submitted a membership form to join PBS at Seri Gaya, Kota Kinabalu. However this membership form was not processed by the party office because Mustapha passed away (Raden Maleh, interview, 22 September 2004).

UMNO Liaison Officer, Abdul Rahman Ahmad denied this as there was no evidence that Mustapha was a PBS member (Ahmad, 2003).

Tun Mustapha was disappointed with the appointment of Sakaran and thus supported the formation of USNO-PBS (PBS-PLUS). He was accompanied by his two sons, Amirkahar and Datu Badaruddin (Daily Express, February 6, 1994: 19).

Former USNO supporters, led by Datu Amirkahar could not be accepted into the new party as the party registration was officially cancelled by the Office of the Registrar of Societies Malaysia (ROS) in July 1993. ROS Office stated that the party deregistration was made on the grounds of irregularities during the general meeting in December 1992 (Daily Express, January 20, 1994: 19).

According to USNO deregistration in 1993, Raden Maleh thought that actual issues were associated with the fears of Sabah UMNO while challenging Sabah politics. The establishment of PBS-USNO (PBS-PLUS) caused anxiety in UMNO and BN as USNO leaders were contesting on the PBS ticket in the State Legislative Assembly Election 1994 as well (Raden Maleh, interview, 22 September 2004).

### **Participation in Sabah State General Election, 1994**

In Sabah State Elections in February 1994, UMNO won 18 of 20 seats contested. Overall, BN just won 23 of the 48 seats and could not form a government, while PBS won 25 of 48 seats. Others BN component were SAPP (3), LDP (1) and AKAR (1) (Herman Luping, 1994). The total number of votes obtained by PBS was 215.977 compared with 201.273 votes for BN (Laporan Pilihan Raya Umum Dewan Undangan Negeri Sabah, 1994: 50-51).

Hence, PBS formed the state government. However when Pairin was prepared to take the oath in as Chief Minister, His Excellency (HE) of Sabah (Tuan Yang Terutama) announced that the ceremony would be postponed. Pairin had to wait for 16 hours (1.15 pm the next-day) and was informed that His Excellency of Sabah was not in good condition and he was advised to take the oath for the following day. After waiting for nearly 36 hours, at 10.05am Pairin was allowed to take oath together with eight members of his cabinet (Daily Express, February 21, 1994: 1).

In March 13, 1994, Pairin decided to dissolve the Sabah State Assembly without prior notice to His Excellency of Sabah. After this news spread among the public, private secretary to His Excellency of Sabah, Sukarti Wakiman made a statement at 3:35 pm, explaining that His Excellency of Sabah "...has not received any letters about the dissolution of the Sabah State Assembly, and he did not know anything about it". Haji Sukarti assert;

"...in the event of the dissolution of the Assembly, His Excellency will not agree as Sabah has just concluded elections." (Daily Express, March 14, 1994: 13).

This acted of Pairin was associated with the resignation of six PBS leaders on March 11. They were Clarence Bongkos Malakun (PBS Vice President), Laimun Laiking (Senator), James Andrew Vitalis (Supreme Council), Conrad Mojuntin (former Minister of Youth and Sports PBS) and Federick Labunda and Mohd Inal Fatah (Youth Leaders). Meanwhile on March 12, Klias Assemblyman, Lajim Ukin with Kemabong Assemblyman, Rubin Balang (Appointed) Assemblyman, Zaini Isa (Labuan) and Member of Parliament, Nurnikman Abdullah also opted out of PBS to join UMNO (Daily Express, March 14, 1994). Tun Mustapha, described those who jumped over the party as;

"...something designed by a State Assemblymen from Sarawak and a Deputy Minister of the Federation" (Daily Express, March 16, 1994).



Due to this mass transfer of PBS Assemblymen into UMNO and BN component parties, PBS lost the simple majority. Since PBS had no longer the mandate, Pairin had to resign as Chief Minister of Sabah at 1:50 pm, March 13, 1994. As UMNO and BN had the majority seat in the State Assembly, Sakaran Dandai as Sabah UMNO Liaison Chief was appointed as the Chief Minister on March 17, 1994 (Buku Cenderamata Sempena Perasmian Bangunan UMNO Sabah 2003: 15). With appointment of Sakaran, it revitalized the desire of UMNO and BN to control of the state government.

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

Since the formation of Malaysia, additional provisions have been provided by the federal government for development in the state. For natural resources such as petroleum and timber, the Federal government promised to bring in foreign investors to invest in the State especially in farming and business. In 1991, an allocation of RM 2,307 billion was approved for rural development programs. This included the construction of schools, hospitals, rural clinics, the Royal Malaysian Police, road system upgrades, airports and aid for the poor community. In The 6th Malaysia Plan, 1991-1995 has issued a development grant to Sabah Federal Government amounting to RM 2,192,71 billions .Previously, Sabah under the different State governments causing stunted state development. The penetration of Sabah by UMNO ended two-terms administration syndrome that befell the previous government. Government-USNO Sabah Alliance governed the state from 1967-1976, BERJAYA (1976-1985) and PBS (1985-1994). The victory of UMNO (BN) in Sabah clearly and unapologetically signified that the old order was over.

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### **Interview**

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Datu Alang Datu Bandira (PAS Sabah Commissioner), Markaz PAS Likas, Kota Kinabalu, interview on February 20, 2003.  
Hamzah Abdullah (PAS Sabah Founder), Taman Indah, Sandakan, interview on July 21, 2004.  
Harris Salleh, (Former Sabah Chief Minister), Jalan SM Lok Yuk, Likas, Kota Kinabalu, interview on February 28, 2004.  
Dzulkiflee Abdul Hamid, (Former Malaysia Deputy Minister of Defence), Kg. Simpudu, Papar, interview on June 30, 2004.  
Ismail Shuib (Umno Members, Kinabatangan), Kg. Kasih Sayang, Kinabatangan, interview on May 10, 2003  
Raden Maleh, (PBS Secretary-General), Parti Bersatu Sabah (PBS) Headquarters, Dongongan, Penampang, interview on September 22, 2004.

### **Speech**

Speech of Tun Ghafar Baba in the closing of the General Meeting on February 21, 1991 USNO at Dewan Wisma MUIS, Kota Kinabalu.  
Speech of Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohammad in UMNO Sabah Ceremony Launching on February 21, 1991 at Dewan Wisma MUIS, Kota Kinabalu, "Pemimpin hamba rakyat".  
Speech by Tun Datu Mustapha bin Datu Harun in the USNO 23rd General Assembly at Melati Beach, Tanjung Aru on February 22, 1991.

### **Letter of Appreciation**

Letter of appreciation from Tun Mustapha, who is the Deputy Chairman of Sabah UMNO liaison to the O.T. Alip Bin Hj. Bakar. (Private Collection of O.T. Haji Alip).  
Letter of appreciation from YAB Dato ' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohammad to Ismail Shuaib (Private Collection of Shuaib Ismail).